

An Open Letter

TO MY FELLOW EDITORS AND PUBLISHERS:

OCT 05, 1977

On June 25, 1977, several metropolitan newspapers published articles purporting to describe events surrounding the departure from Panax of two among the more than 50 senior editors who make up the Panax organization. Those reports included the inaccurate claim that the two editors in question had been fired for refusing to print one or more articles distributed from corporate headquarters. The fact that the editors of more than a score of our other newspapers which did not publish those articles remained unmolested in their jobs did not seem to matter to those who rushed into print; indeed, most of those same newspapers have made no effort, to this day, to either check the facts with us, much less set the record straight.

Within 10 days--and that includes a long, holiday weekend--of the appearance of those distorted stories, the National News Council, in unprecedented haste, had rushed to judgment on Panax, inventing its own definition of what is wrong with group ownership as the premise for its finding. Its finding said that by doing what I had not done, I had "highlighted one of the great underlying fears about newspaper chain operations--that what the public reads is directed from afar by autocratic owners."

First, a word about "doing what I had not done." The Council itself, in its findings, said it had "elected not to involve itself" with the essential facts of the case; namely, the circumstances surrounding the departure of the two editors, nor the substance of the articles in question. The fact that they had no facts to fit their theory did not deter them, in the slightest, from rushing to judgment.

Now, as to those "underlying fears:" anyone even vaguely familiar with newspaper operations knows that it would be literally impossible to "direct from afar" the myriad editorial decisions leading to the appearance of that daily miracle, the newspaper. What is at issue is whether the publisher ought also to have access to the pages of the newspapers for which he is responsible, and the answer to that, it seems, ought to be obvious. In passing, if the National News Council wishes to concern itself with a real threat to "autocratic control," we may suggest it take a look at network news programs, shaped by a handful of persons in New York and Washington, and beamed down the electronic throats of their affiliates without so much as a bleep being changed.

We believe that what has happened to us in this kangaroo court setting highlights, rather, one of the profound fears expressed by newspapermen everywhere when the National News Council was coming into being four years ago: that it would attempt to become prosecutor, judge and jury of the media, instead of a needed and legitimate outlet for public grievances and fighter for press freedom. It was that fear which caused the American Society of Newspaper Editors to vote 257 to 106 in late 1972 against the establishment of a News Council-type organization.

The change has come about, we believe, since Norman Isaacs, a self-styled "public scold," took over as chairman earlier this year. In his very first Editor & Publisher interview, Isaacs said he planned an "activist" role for the Council. Less noticed, and little reported, was the fact that Isaacs planned to capitalize on a sense of expanded direction worked out by a committee on which he, himself, had been the dominant force.

We say "sense of direction," rather than rules, because the rules under which the Council was supposed to operate still required a go-slow caution which Isaacs & Company chose to violate flagrantly in the Panax case. Those rules, for example, require a written complaint. We still have seen none. And a written reply. Instead, Isaacs ordered a telephone poll on a case in which he hadn't even, by his own admission, bothered to check the facts. We are in no way reassured by Isaacs' statement now that the Council routinely departs from its own rules. Some may approve of that kind of "activism." Some may also believe that the question of group ownership and the relationship of publishers to editors ought to be studied.

But we, in Panax, have decided that the National News Council is not going to do it over our wrongly-accused bodies.

And so we respectfully decline Professor Isaacs' invitation to appear before his kangaroo court.

Instead, we join John Knight, who wrote four years ago about the Council:

"Any self-respecting editor who submits to bar association 'guidelines' or subscribes to meddling by the National News Council is simply eroding his own freedoms.

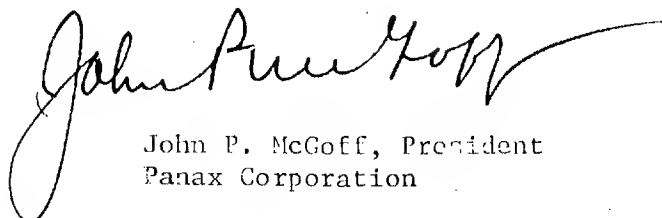
"Editors are accountable to their readers, not to a group of self-appointed busybodies with time on their hands."*

It is to that jury that we will comfortably and confidently take and rest our case--our readers.

*EDITOR & PUBLISHER
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